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## Literacy journeys: home and family literacy practices in immigrant households and their congruence with schooled literacy

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*Major sociocultural contexts of learning such as families, communities and schools are imbued with power, and power favours some more than others. Given that schools are important sites of social and cultural reproduction, one of their major tasks is to teach learners to be literate. However, literacy is often viewed only as schooled literacy in the dominant language, and the role of the home has been undervalued in the past. In this paper I examine, through a sociocultural lens, the role played by the home and community in literacy learning. Through data elicited from observations of family interactions and conversations, as well as interviews with family members in two immigrant households, I examine their home and community literacy practices and ask how these practices intersect with schooled literacy. I conclude that immigrant children have far greater language and literacy skills than presumed, and that schools need to recognize language and literacy practices that children engage in at home and in the community, and emphasize that social justice for all requires educational shifts.*

**Keywords:** family literacy practices; immigrant families; language; schooled literacy; social justice

### Introduction

Transformation in the South African education system has focused extensively on dismantling apartheid structures which promoted exclusivity and privilege in education, primarily through its educational policies (Pendlebury & Enslin, 2004). Policies such as the White Paper on Education and Training (Department of Education, 1995) have firmly established basic education as a right, and core principles such as social justice, human rights, non-discrimination and inclusivity are espoused. A continuing challenge for post-apartheid South Africa is providing education for a democratic, socially just country, that is, in translating its policies into practice. Increasingly, our education system has to serve not only South African citizens, but immigrants and refugees from the world over who are entering South Africa for a variety of reasons: to escape war-torn countries, to provide a better life for their families, to access better education, for employment and health care opportunities, and to engage in business (refer also to Hemson, in print), for a more extensive discussion). Accurate statistics surrounding legal and non-legal immigrants in the country are difficult to establish, but what is clear is that they are a minority, yet, are equally deserving of attention in our education system. Immigrant children in particular bring their own language, literacy and cultural practices to the classroom, leaving teachers and schools wondering how to cope with their specific needs, in conjunction with their already over-burdened workloads.

Schools are important sites of social, cultural and ideological reproduction, and one of

their major tasks is to teach learners to be literate. Yet, as Blackledge (2000:1) quite rightly questions, how do we define literacy, and is literacy the same for everyone regardless of their social and economic status and diversity? Is literacy learned only in schools or in homes and communities as well? If so, how should schools respond? What is the importance of literacy in terms of cultural and personal identity? What role does literacy play where there are unequal relations of power among different groups, in the case of this study, immigrant families?

In providing a contextual framework, this paper addresses two key arguments: first, the lack of congruence between home and school literacies, and second, the view that immigrant literacies are viewed as a deficit. In multicultural multilingual societies there are diverse literacies which have different meanings for different groups of people. Rogoff and Correa-Chavez in their foreword to *Many Pathways to Literacy* (Gregory *et al.*, 2004: i) quite aptly observe that today's children engage simultaneously with "hybrid traditions of several communities", for example, children learn to speak, read and write different languages and scripts such as Urdu and English. Therefore, while children may not show schooled literacy in the dominant language of the school *per se*, (usually English), in home and community settings they demonstrate complex language and literacy patterns and behaviours as they weave their way through multifaceted literacy activities. However, these multiple literacies are often not recognized by schools that make the assumption that parents who are literate in the dominant language are children's primary support in language and literacy, and that the levels of congruence between the home and school in such instances are narrow. Researchers such as Blackledge (2000), Gregory (1994, 1996) and Delgado-Gaitan (1994a; 1994b) therefore argue that it is only when schools respond positively to the literacies of their communities, that much can be done to reverse the inequities which are evident in relations between the dominant and minority groups. By involving parents, family and community members in literacy teaching, and by building existing literacies of the family and community, schools can act as "catalysts in a process of empowerment for children, families and teachers (and) collaborative literacy teaching and learning can be a positive force in the redefinition of relations of power, and the enhancement of social justice" (Blackledge, 2000:1). The reality however, is that access to homes is minimal, and often hard to come by, and therefore there are few insights into home literacy practices.

Historically, immigrants have had to learn to conform and assimilate to a new country and this is usually through its educational system, because of their aspirations for a better life for their children (Delgado-Gaitan, 1994b). Regardless of overwhelming differences such as cultural, linguistic, economic and social differences, often immigrants and refugees hope to succeed and make economic progress in the host country. However, minority participation is often viewed in terms of a deficit: the view that cultural and linguistic barriers prevent integration in school and community life is not uncommon. We may find instances where parents do not communicate in the dominant language, while children exposed to the language, in this case, English, at school, become language brokers in the home and community.

In this paper I set out to examine the literacy practices in two immigrant households in order to examine how the home and family practices intersect with schooled literacy. The paper establishes as its theoretical frame a sociocultural context of literacy by locating the work in New Literacy Studies. Thereafter the context of the study is discussed, before extracts of data, from observations and interviews and conversations with family members in the two households, are presented and interpreted. Finally, some implications of home literacy practices for schooled literacy are suggested.

### **Sociocultural context of literacy: New Literacy Studies**

Language learning is socially constructed knowledge and understanding that develops through interactions with and mediation by more experienced members of the community (Rogoff, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978). Young children therefore develop an understanding of reading and writing and what it entails by observing and participating in literacy practices which are culturally situated. This means that children go to school with different experiences of how to act during literacy events and may have different beliefs about the nature of literacy. For some these understandings are congruent with school, for others the lack of congruence is vast.

Gee (1996) suggests that in New Literacy Studies (NLS) literacy is not only a skill, but a contextualised practice, thus NLS treat language and literacy as social practices rather than only technical skills to be learnt in formal education. The concept requires that language and literacy be studied as they occur naturally in social life, taking into account context and their different meanings to different cultural groups, thus the focus in this study on home and family. Gee (2000) adds that reading and writing only make sense when studied in the context of social and cultural (and historical, political and economic) practices of which they are part (Gee, 2000).<sup>1</sup>

Thus, there are many literacies that occur within varying social contexts. Barton, Hamilton and Ivanic (2000:1) agree “Literacy is situated. All uses of written language can be seen as located in particular times and places. Equally, all literate activity is indicative of broader social practices”. In adopting a framework of literacy as social practice, literacies are positioned in relation to the social institutions and power relations that sustain them, education being one such institution (Street, 1993; Gee, 1996). Thus the teaching of one type of literacy could privilege certain groups, while disempowering others, such as immigrant children who have not had extensive access to that dominant literacy. On the other hand, not exposing learners to that dominant literacy serves to exclude them from society at large. Barton and Hamilton (2000) agree that there are different literacies associated with different domains in life, and as Gee (1996) adds, home is the primary domain, and school, secondary, thus what learners bring from the home is valuable, though often marginalised in the school environment.

### **Literacy, power, social justice**

While it is often assumed that low income and minority families provide inappropriate environments to foster literacy, several studies dispute this (for example, Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Heath, 1983; Gregory & Williams, 2000). Gregory *et al.* (2004: 17) refer to the practice of devaluing non-mainstream language and literacies as “perpetuating a deficit perspective,” as referred to in the second argument earlier in this paper that limits learning potential for all students. This results in an array of views, ranging from students’ knowledge and experiences not being validated or legitimised (Nieto, 1999, cited in Gregory *et al.*, 2004), to children whose personhood is not celebrated being themselves viewed as defective (Delpit, 2002:41). Therefore Moll (2001:13 in Gregory *et al.*, 2004) says “This dual strategy of exclusion and condemnation of one’s language and culture, fostering disdain for what one knows and who one is, has another critical consequence in terms of schooling — it influences children’s attitudes toward their knowledge and personal competence. That is, it creates a social distance between themselves and the world of school knowledge”. This growing social distance is therefore why we need to validate students’ knowledge, experiences and personhood, which is critical in educational spheres.

In theorizing a sociocultural approach to literacy, Gregory *et al.* (2004:7), like Vygotsky

(1978), Rogoff (2003) and Lave and Wenger (1991) observe that young children learn as apprentices alongside more experienced members of communities. The role of mediator, such as teacher, adult, sibling, peer, or grandparent is crucial in initiating children into new cultural practices or guiding them in learning new skills. This may be viewed in terms of Vygotsky's (1978:86) zone of proximal development, which aligns well with Rogoff's (2003) notion of guided participation, and Lave and Wenger's (1991) legitimate peripheral participation. Therefore schools and teachers need to draw on what children know as co-constructors of knowledge. Studies attesting to this include Heath's (1983) seminal work on families from different racial and economic groups in the United States in the 1980s that showed that young children entered school as active members of specific language and literacy practices, as well as studies by Gregory (1994); Volk (1997); Luke and Kale (1997) and Kenner (2000).

### **The study: Two immigrant families**

This small-scale case study of literacy practices in two immigrant families in Johannesburg, South Africa, is based on data collected through observations, family conversations, and interviews with family members over a period of three months. The study forms part of a broader ethnographic study on family literacy practices. The aim of this case study is to explore family literacy practices, with the intention of answering questions such as: What are some of the families' literacy practices? How do these practices intersect with schooled literacy? How do parents and family members enact their role as home literacy tutors? How do the families' home literacies contribute to their children's literacy learning? What are the implications of family literacy practices for schools?

### **Rumi's family**

Rumi is a 25-year old Bengali woman who came to South Africa as a young bride of 19 to marry Riaz, her Bengali husband, who specifically wanted a wife from his home country. They have one child, five-year old Adaan, and were expecting their second child shortly at the time of the study. Rumi dresses traditionally and speaks Bengali at home, but is fairly fluent in English, having studied it in school in Bengal. She lives with her husband Riaz, her mother-in-law, Fatima (50), her father-in-law Ahmed (55), and her sister-in law, Shireen (20) in a middle-class suburb in central Johannesburg. Riaz's grandmother from Bengal was visiting South Africa at the time of my observations.

Riaz works at an accounting firm, having completed a Bachelor of Commerce degree a few years back. Rumi does not work, although she says she would like to become a teacher one day when her children are older. Riaz's parents came to South Africa about 17 years ago in a bid to establish a better life for their children, but said they sometimes found the politics in the country frustrating. They usually return to Bengal every two years or so to visit family, although this is something they could not afford to do in their early years in the country. Bengali is the language spoken most often at home, largely to accommodate Fatima, and grandmother. The family would also like to keep the language alive through its use, although Ahmed, Riaz, Rumi and Shireen speak English quite fluently. Fatima relies heavily on her children and husband to help her. She has had opportunities to learn English, but feels Bengali keeps her "close to home". Grandmother speaks only Bengali, but understands rudimentary English.

### Soha's family

Soha is Iranian woman in her mid-forties, who has been living in South Africa for about 10 years. She has three daughters: Ayeesha, 21 who is married to an Iranian and living in Iran, and who has just had her first child; Tasmin, 20, who is in her second year at university in Johannesburg; and Fiza who is in Grade 12 at a local public school. Soha helps her husband Ismaeel with his carpet business from time to time. The family lives in a middle-class suburb in Johannesburg, and returns to Iran once or twice a year, usually on buying trips, or to visit relatives. They communicate in Persian and English. The daughters are fluent, speaking slightly accented English. Soha has a stronger accent, and says she sometimes struggles to get the word she is looking for in English, and this makes her shy and nervous among English speakers.

In sections to follow I present and describe three excerpts of data: two from observations at Rumi's home, and one from Soha's home, and then discuss the data.

### The data

#### Excerpt 1: Observation at Rumi's home: Books and linguistics resources

It was a Friday afternoon, after the midday prayer. Fatima and Rumi had prepared a meal for Ahmed and Riaz who go to mosque to pray on Fridays. They came home for lunch before returning to work for the afternoon. The women had cleared the dishes and settled down to a cup of tea. The TV was turned on, and a Bollywood DVD played softly in the background. Grandmother sat aside, away from the younger women, and appeared absorbed in a religious text written in Arabic. Rumi sat with little Adaan on her lap as they turned the pages of a book together. It was a children's book about animals with brightly coloured illustrations, annotated in English with the name of each animal as well as an adjective to describe it, for example, 'tall giraffe'.

Rumi: Look at the animals Adaan — so big.

Adaan: I like the elephant ... he has a long *nak* (pointing to his nose).

Rumi: Yes, a long nose ...

Adaan: The lion is very loud ... waaah (imitates the lion's roar and screws up his face while doing so, with his hands outstretched to resemble paws).

Rumi: Ooooh ... (pretending to be afraid).

Fatima (to Researcher):

I will like read to baby (meaning Adaan) too, but no Bengali books, only what we bring from home — not here in South Africa. I can manage to read small words English, but if I read wrong word, what teacher will say? Mostly I show him pictures.

Rumi: It's ok ma (mother), Adaan is learning a lot at school, when I go they say he is talking more now, and joining other children.

Researcher:

Where does he go to school? Did he talk very little at school when he started?

Rumi: He goes nursery from this year only, near here, but soon is big school ... teacher says he is talking slowly (little) for English ... but now is more and more with friends. First was very shy.

Researcher:

Do the teachers ask you to read to him at home?

Rumi: Yes, they say it is very good for English so he will not struggle too much with English. He is picking up (English). So we get picture books, big books for him to

read. He need that. We go in the weekend, we buy. Library is more hard to go...for transport ... only when I have the motor (car) ... I am learning to drive ... It's best for him to read in English, Bengali won't help him here. But Riaz says that he must have some Bengali — for his roots, and how will he be when we go to visit (Bengal). We only went when he was a baby. [As she speaks, Adaan points out excitedly at a character on the DVD, and says something in Bengali]

Rumi: He loves Shahrukh Khan (popular Bollywood action and romantic actor), especially the action movies ... he knows this one, but he wants to read his favourite book now. Once he is watching he will forget the book ... (the TV remains switched on).

Researcher:

Does he write in any language?

Rumi: Writing is more hard ... the letters is different from English ... Bengali is different, Arabic is different ... To speak is more easy.

Fatima: He speaks English, but he still likes Bengali for culture — he is small only but he knows who he is. Now he is in madressa (Islamic religious school) he will know more.

Researcher (to Rumi):

How often does he go to madressa?

Rumi: Started this year also, is a small school, only at a neighbour's house, but he is learning *aliph-ba* (the alphabet) in Arabic, and *kalimas* (verses). He goes three times in the week — in the afternoon. Just now he will start with exams even. So ma and I teach him at home too, even (grandmother) teaches him words even if we don't speak Arabic.

In this extract, it is primarily the women who are involved because Riaz and Ahmed are at work. This is their time to relax, watch some TV, and to play with the little boy. The play-reading interaction and banter between mother and child show that this is not an uncommon occurrence. Rumi gently reminds Adaan that nak is nose in English without drawing too much attention to it. They are able to focus on the book even though the TV is switched on. The extract shows that there is great diversity in the languages Adaan speaks. The fact that his mother is reading to him in English shows that she values English, a language that has capital in the country. The family also invests in his literacy by buying him books and CD-roms regularly. He speaks some Bengali to his grandmother and great-grandmother, and they in turn also help him with his Bengali and Arabic. At five, he is multilingual, being exposed as he is to English, Bengali, Hindi (in the Bollywood movie) and Arabic (at madressa), that is, he belongs to hybrid linguistic communities. He also has multiple home literacy tutors in the form of his parents and grandparent. They in turn are happy to play this role. Fatima expresses an interest in reading to him in Bengali were the resources available, although she is hesitant about helping him in English, at the risk of displeasing his teacher. It is interesting that his father prefers for him to understand Bengali for cultural reasons, while his mum, who is a more recent immigrant from Bengal, prefers him to speak English for his future. Thus, she places more value on English. This echoes many South African parents who prefer to have their children to learn and have access to English early in their schooling.

**Excerpt 2: Observation at Rumi's house: Cultural compromises and home literacy tutors**

It is a weekday afternoon. Rumi is in the dining room where Adaan is busy 'practising' writing.

He has a companion, a friend from a neighbour's house who also attends madressa with him. They often play with each other in the afternoons. Fatima is busy in the kitchen but pops in from time to time. Once again Grandmother is reading a religious text in Arabic.

Rumi: Like this Adaan, hold the pencil then make the curve like this ... Don't press, pencil will break.

(She demonstrates how he should form a particular letter on a photocopied worksheet he has to complete for madressa. The worksheet consists of drawings of a mosque, a book, a man, and so on, which the children are required to colour in, and a few lines in which the children should write what they see by imitating the script on the sheet. Adaan attempts the letter a few times, while he does this his friend peers over and shows him — "Not like this like this — your's looks like an 'o' not a 'u'. Rumi chats with me while the boys continue.)

Rumi: At madressa they write right to left, at school left to right. The teacher at school she understands because she understands Arabic, but I heard that in big school it is more hard, the teachers do not like this ... say English and Arabic is so different for reading and writing ... children must go for therapy (meaning occupational therapy to correct writing and co-ordination problems). Maybe he will go to a Muslim school.

Researcher:

Oh, have you considered other options for schools? Like public government schools?

Rumi: I would like English school, it is better for him to learn from now, but what happens to madressa and school ... it is a big clash. They do so much sport, no time for madressa in school. I want him to be good, but he also is a Muslim boy, these days it is hard everywhere for us ...

Researcher:

Do you mean it is hard to be a boy or to be Muslim?

Rumi: Both ... it is for a boy to take over the family ... and you know how it is hard for Muslims everywhere ... there is trouble with dressing, speaking, praying, eating... My second cousin is in France...she has problems with the scarf ... what they are saying to take off ... at least here (SA) it is not so bad ... we have a chance.

This extract shows Rumi once again helping Adaan with his homework. Here he is attempting to practice Arabic script with his mother and his friend. We observe his mother and peer as his literacy tutors. Arabic script is written right to left, which she feels might be problematic at school when he learns to write from left to right. This concern makes her wonder if she should not send him to an Islamic school instead where teachers understand the cultural situation better. Her concern has prompted her to speak to other mothers who have told her that some teachers wanted Muslim children to go to occupational therapists because of the conflict in writing style in English and Arabic. While the Koran is read in Arabic, sometimes the language is not understood. Farah (1998, in Blackledge, 2000) explains that the meaning of Koranic texts for Muslims does not lie entirely in the interpretation of text but is symbolically related to the Koran being the word of God and therefore sounding out the word is a blessed act. Rumi's concern for maintaining her Islamic culture would encourage her to send him to an Islamic school even though she says she would prefer a public government school. She does not want to compromise her cultural beliefs, where sending him to public school may mean that participation in extra-curricular activities might mean encroaching into madressa time. These activities are integrated and strongly promoted at Islamic schools. There is an indication of a patriarchal system where Adaan, as a five year old boy is expected to be head of the family one

day, therefore his cultural engagement and commitment is vital in maintaining his identity as a Muslim boy. His father appears to blend the cultural with work life. Rumi feels somewhat compromised. Her Muslim identity and cultural values are highlighted when she expresses her concern for worldwide distrust of Islam. The incident she uses is the ongoing debate over the banning of the headscarf and burka in Europe. She values her cultural practices very highly and sees them as being compromised.

### Excerpt 3: Visit to Soha's house: Tea, cake and marriage

Soha has just served tea and cake while we chat. We sit at her kitchen table as her daughters arrive. Tasmin has just finished her day at university and has picked up Fiza from school, where she was practising for the school choir. Ismaeel is at work.

Soha: Salaam (greeting), how was your day, how was the traffic?

Tasmin: Ok, salaam Leila, hello, nice to see you again. Everything was ok ami (mum).

Soha: Oh oh, you must say Auntie Leila.

(The girls giggle and roll their eyes).

Soha: Respect ... oh oh ... (shaking her head). When we came here I knew we will lose some of our ways, that is why we still speak so much Persian. When we gather (with friends) it's our food, our music, and we dance, the ladies. Even the South African ladies are too shy to be like us ... so free ... it is allowed for us ... and we do make up ... belly dancing (she laughs).

Researcher:

Do you feel you could still live in Iran now?

Soha: Before I would say I can stay here, but now that Ayeesha is there, and the baby is born, it is nice to spend more time there ... we are missing so much. But the education for the girls is much better here.

(Ayeesha and Tasmin, unlike Fiza spent a few years in Iran completing school before joining their family in South Africa.)

Researcher:

Did you think it was better for her to marry an Iranian?

Soha: Much better, so long we are here, we do not like the culture like ours it is different even though we are all muslim. Muslims in South Africa are very different. The young go out ... no elders ... Ayeesha always wanted to go back one day to Iran. Maybe Tasmin will go also one day soon.

Researcher: (To the daughters):

How are you coping with studies?

Tasmin: My main course is Linguistics and Sociology, so there is so much writing. I had to do a special course in English when I started but it didn't help so much with the writing we have to do know. I know the work very well, but to write it academically is quite hard ... the essays mostly.

Fiza: (Interrupts):

Why don't you ask Leila to help you, she can do Linguistics ...

Tasmin: Fiza! But really, the lecturers are mostly nice but some of them do not understand, I think, that foreign students have different requirements. Mostly on campus we speak English so English is better all the time.

Tasmin (addressing Fiza):

Did you finish your essay? I must read it still.



Fiza (To Researcher):

I am fine, we are doing so much at school, I am included in everything ... there are some Turkish girls in school, even from India, one Egyptian ... so we have lots of foreign students, we share our culture with the South African girls. The South African girls like to be with us, we show them, they show us how everything is done. Even in our school we can wear a scarf. All the schools do not allow that.

Fiza (To Tasmin):

The essay is ok, and my English is better ... ok, maybe look at it then.

Researcher:

And what are you going to study next year?

Fiza: For me it is BA or BA Law. Law is the first choice, even if I can't practice (Law) everywhere, I will write (entrance) exams. My English is very good so I will cope.

Researcher:

Would you consider working in Iran?

Fiza: No, I will work here or in UK, not America, never. I won't even marry first, ami wants us to get married in Iran, Tas will do it, she wants to settle when her degree is over, but I want to work first, maybe marry later, here or there, but Aba (dad) does not want us to settle with South African boys ... their ways are not good, too many girlfriends.

Telephone rings. Tasmin answers. It is Ayeesha from Iran. She speaks excitedly in Persian.

Unlike in extracts 1 and 2, in this extract we observe older school and university students, the core literacy issues, however, remain similar. In this extract Tasmin and Fiza come across as being quite independent. They have a car and travel on their own. Soha shows concern for their casual greeting of the researcher, and finds it disrespectful, which amuses the girls. To Soha, like Riaz, to speak Persian was to maintain Iranian culture and identity. She mentions community gatherings where women get together for parties. Here they are free to enjoy themselves in cultural pursuits, where music and dancing permissible, and not taboo, as among many South African Muslims. The family's preference for their daughters to eventually marry Iranians shows that they are not fully integrated into South African lifestyle, and want to maintain their cultural practices and identity. Tasmin and Fiza appear to be settled in university and school, respectively. Tasmin verbalizes some discomfort about writing academically in English, and feels that lecturers do not understand foreign students' needs as they should. The university appears to offer courses in English, though the effectiveness of the courses are debatable to Tasmin, yet she is capable of helping her sister with her writing. Mostly she feels that speaking in English helps her settle and improve. Fiza appears to be very well-settled in school and participates in extra-curricular activities and has lots of friends. She emphasizes that her English is good, and this seems to define her in the family. She states her need to work rather than marry, which may arouse some opposition from her parents, and would even consider working overseas. Having been in school in South Africa for ten years, Fiza feels comfortable, and comes across as the most integrated with South African culture. Ayeesha's call from Iran and its enthusiastic response in Persian reminds us that the family is Iranian, first and foremost.

## Discussion

### Family literacy practices

The two families engage in multiple multifaceted literacy practices. In Rumi's household, Bengali, English, Arabic and Hindi play prominent roles. The family prays together in Arabic,

the women read recipes, Fatima writes home in Bengali, Riaz reads the newspaper and watches English TV, they watch Bollywood movies in Hindi, subtitled in English, read to Adaan in English, and converse in English and Bengali. They use technology to expand their communicative possibilities by Skyping relatives in Bengal. Together they share an extensive range of literacy practices. Soha's household is peppered with a mixture of Persian and English. The family also reads Arabic scriptures and texts, and like Rumi's family, has a penchant for Indian Bollywood movies, to which the daughters sing and dance. Community events such as madressa and women's parties provide rich culturally literate practices. These practices, rather than providing a deficit model, are linguistically rich, and both families are surrounded by multiple resources. Delgado-Gaitan (1994a; 1994b) in her work with Hispanic and Russian immigrant communities respectively also shows how texts are used in these households: letters home are treasured, as are telephone calls and invitations that arrive through the post. Yet the assumption is often made that the homes of minority culture families are less effective literacy and language environments than homes of middle class majority culture families (Blackledge, 2000; Delgado-Gaitan, 1994a; 1994b). It is also noticeable that more time is spent at home with the mother in both cases than with the father. This is reasonable, given the time spent at work by the men. Most of the literacy practices are therefore shaped by the women. In her study of Bangladeshi parents in London, Gregory (1996) found that parents were committed to their children learning English in school, as well as Bangladeshi. In her study too, madressa played a prominent role.

#### Family literacy intersecting with schooled literacy

Most often schools favour certain groups over others, and the value attached to literacy at school may be different from those held by communities. Rumi considers sending Adaan to an Islamic school because this most likely replicates the home culture, even though her initial preference is for a government public school. Blackledge (2000) states that authority is vested in mainstream culture, and that these literacy practices have higher status and power. Thus there is more consistency and continuity between home and school for children from the dominant culture. As the observations show, children bring a range of experiences of literacy interactions rooted in the culture of the home. Closer congruence means children are more likely to become literate in school terms: "When children possess the cultural repertoires upon which school depends, all goes well" (Blackledge, 2000:8).

In Rumi's family, Fatima, the mother-in-law who does not speak English fluently would like to read to the child, however, she feels nervous that her inability to communicate in English would be frowned upon by Adaan's teachers, thus replicating the behaviour she displayed with her own children, by not reading to them, and not attending school meetings, inadvertently perpetuating the view held by schools that children from immigrant homes are not exposed to the dominant culture or language. Yet Rumi reads to Adaan and surrounds him with English literacy in the form of books, CDs and DVDs. In Soha's family, although living in South Africa for a shorter period of time, they spend time with South African friends, and Fiza socializes with South African girls at school. Fiza is helped with her academic writing from time to time by Tasmin, who is a university student. So while the family practices do not intersect strongly, English is used much more extensively around the home.

#### Community literacies

Religion and language play an important role in both families, in both cases neither family wants to lose their culture or language, and speaking the language reinforces their identity.

Both are symbolic markers of cultural identity. Adaan attends an informal community school, or madressa at a neighbour's house. As shown by Saxena's (1994) study of Punjabis in Southall, new minority groups often try to maintain language through community language schools. Often families are motivated by religion to maintain and have children learn literacies of the home country, and to avoid language loss, for example Gregory's (1996) study of the Bengali community. Soha and her daughters enjoy ladies' tea parties where they get an opportunity to dress up, and enjoy music and dancing. These are women's only functions and there is much friendly rivalry to see who can throw the best party, and is therefore strongly rooted in community. They also attend weekly prayer meetings where they socialise with members of the Iranian community. While the girls are older, they too attended madressa as children.

### **Implications for schools and teachers**

Inevitably schools demand that minority language parents adopt the linguistic rules of the dominant group to support child's learning. For some families literacy as demanded by schools involves reading English books and paves the way to academic success, but for others this is intimidating. Minority language families may feel they have to give up their cultural identity and adopt aspects of the dominant culture.

The current view of home-school congruence is a deficit model that undervalues parents (Delgado-Gaitan, 1990): schools attempt to change home life to fit with school by involving parents, however, with little concern for parents who do not speak the dominant language. It is a vicious cycle where these parents do not attend school meetings, and do not contribute to homework in the dominant language, reinforcing the view of the school.

Blackledge (2000) believes that change can only be effected when schools alter power relations with minority parents. Minority parents need to be involved as equals in the process of learning. Many already provide their children with literacy-rich environments, and this needs to be valued by schools. Minority cultures need to be supported and understood, through the curriculum and classroom activities. Any collaboration with the school needs to be genuine, and for the benefit of the school and the children. Thus greater co-operation between the home and school is recommended. Schools need to give up the roles as gate-keepers of the dominant culture, and acknowledge the right of all to basic education. A continuing challenge for post-apartheid South Africa is providing education for a democratic, socially just country, that is, in translating its policies into practice.

On a more practical level, for instance, parents may be engaged as interpreters at parent meetings, and notices may be handed out in different languages. Learners can also be engaged by being encouraged to design posters of key events in the various languages spoken for display around school, in a meaningful, rather than tokenistic way, or else further divisions will perpetuate.

### **Conclusion**

In order to ensure continuity and congruence between home and school, teaching should occur in a context that is compatible with the culture of the learners. Responsibility for change lies firmly with school not the home, or else we are adopting a deficit model. Learners constantly face pressure to adapt to school culture at the risk of negating their minority culture. They succumb because they do not want to be alienated from school. One of the very profound consequences is that minority indigenous languages face the danger of disappearing because of not being transmitted to the next generation (Hornberger, 1998). Hornberger supports Fish-

man (1991, in Hornberger, 1998:442) who argues that language shift cannot be reversed if the language is not transferred to the next generation. The disjuncture between speaking the dominant language and the home language may give rise to tensions in host countries, especially with growing anti-immigrant concerns worldwide. In many communities tensions are created by immigrants speaking their home language and being seen as not assimilating easily (Suarez-Orozco in Hornberger, 1998). Hornberger's (1998) argument for a biliteracy model is therefore realistic: "It is crucial that language minorities be empowered to make choices about which languages and which literacies to promote for which purposes; and that in making those choices, the guiding principles must be to balance the counterpoised dimensions of language rights for the mutual protection of all" (Hornberger, 1998:454). Schools therefore have a responsibility and can do a lot to reverse structures of power in society which prevent minority parents from participating. As Ferdman (1990:200 in Blackledge, 2000:123) says "Literacy education, when it acknowledges the role of cultural identity, may serve to enhance self-esteem as it derives from a sense of self in a social context".

## Note

1. This is based on the idea that reading and writing are situated within specific Discourses, with a capital 'D' (Gee, 1996). Gee (1996) uses the term 'Discourses', rather than 'discourses', which refers to stretches of language. A Discourse, he says is a way of being together in the world (for example, gangs, classrooms, gay, and so on), and learners may belong to several Discourses simultaneously.

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